

this charming man by orphan_account

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Summary:

Here he is: half-asleep and broke as all hell, about to embark on a six-day journey across the country to get to his cousin's wedding, with only said cousin's best friend—whom Mike still on occasion thinks of as Richie's Hot Friend—for company.

He really hopes he makes it out of this alive.

1. say anything

2017

Mike is half-asleep when Richie calls, his right cheek pressed into his pillow, the ringing of his phone just loud enough to be heard over the sound of Stan's snores coming from the other side of their shared dorm room. This particular habit of his remains to be the only thing Mike isn't going to miss about college.

He stretches his hand out and searches around blindly for his phone, plucks it off his bedside table. "Richie?" he mumbles into the receiver. "Is something wrong?" Ever since that one incident freshman year, Richie has always made it a point to be mindful of the time difference whenever he calls.

"Wrong?" Richie echoes, and it's then that Mike realizes that he sounds positively delighted. "My dear Michael, things have never been more right in my life! I'm getting married in September, my good lad, and your presence is strictly mandatory."

Mike blinks, tries to make sense of Richie's words. "What? Speak normally, Rich." He's really not in the mood for one of his Voices right now. "Didn't you and Eddie get engaged in, like, sophomore year?"

In fact, he has a very clear memory of crouching down in the bushes outside Richie and Eddie's UCLA dorm, his legs cramping with the effort of folding his tall frame into such a tight spot. Beside him, Dustin had been holding his phone out in an attempt to capture the moment, while simultaneously elbowing Mike in the head.

Richie snorts and reverts to his usual self. "Yeah, we did. But the lovely Mrs. K made Eddie *swear* he wouldn't get married until he got his degree." Mike can practically hear his eye roll. "So, graduation is in two weeks, and we figured three months was enough time to round up the whole gang."

"You're only twenty-two, Rich," Mike says, more than aware that he's shifting into what Dustin affectionately calls his Mother Hen Mode.

He cares about his friends, so sue him. “There’s no reason to get *married* now.”

“When have you ever known me to beat around the bush with anything?” Richie asks him dryly, and, okay, he has a point there. Mike opens his mouth to tell him so, but then, in a tone almost uncharacteristically soft, Richie adds, “You’ll come, right?”

And Mike says, “You know I will,” because he would never forgive himself for answering back with anything else.

The only problem that eventually crops up concerning the forthcoming nuptials between the Trashmouth and the Hypochondriac—Stan’s words, not his—is its location. In Los Angeles. Which happens to be a good two thousand miles away from Nancy and Jonathan’s apartment in the Upper West Side, and Mike’s temporary home following graduation.

Mike lands a job working for a small production house in Brooklyn, and he spends the rest of his free time apartment-sitting for his sister and Jonathan while they’re on location in Russia for the next six months, helping the police track down some human trafficking ring for the *Times*. His mother is less than thrilled.

Stan moves to Boston at the start of July to pursue an internship at a prestigious accounting firm like the good Jewish kid he is—Richie’s words, not his—and his departure leaves Mike strangely devoid of all emotion, like some kind of certainly he’d held about his life up until that point had left along with Stan. It’s this stark realization that continues to plague him in the month that follows.

“Do you ever feel like we peaked in middle school?” Mike says into the phone one night, pacing back and forth across the threadbare rug that covers most of the living room floor.

“No.” Will sounds amused. “Who even peaks at the age of thirteen?”

“We might have!” Mike stops in his tracks and waves his right arm around. “I mean, after spending most of our childhood battling

monsters and taking down rogue government officials, where are we supposed to go from there?"

"Mike, you're twenty-one," Will tells him, as eternally patient as ever. "I'm sure you're a bit too young to be having a quarter-life crisis."

"Look, I make coffee and read shitty scripts nobody wants to use," Mike starts. He's aware that he's bordering on hysterical at this point, but it's like a dam has broken, everything pouring out of him without warning. "Is this really what I'm supposed to do for the rest of my life?"

He's known most of his life that his creativity at *Dungeons & Dragons* was indicative of some innate desire to be a director, to take stories that matter and bring them to life for people to see. But this still doesn't cancel out the fact that he feels kind of empty at times, a little like he's behind everyone else.

"Yeah, and I help Steve teach English to a bunch of eleven-year-olds for minimum wage." Mike can't see him, but he's pretty sure that his best friend is rolling his eyes at him as they speak. "But again, we're *twenty-one*. If there's someone who is bound to figure things out eventually, it's you."

Mike has to actively keep himself from blurting out that if there's anyone he knows who deserves to have everything they've ever wanted handed to them, it's Will. Will, who has survived a descent into literal hell and back. Will, who Mike has risked his life for, who Mike would continue to risk his life for without question.

"Does this have anything to do with Richie's wedding?" Will finally asks, like he'd been purposefully holding back until now. "Is it why you haven't booked your flight yet?"

The week before, after a frantic phone call from Eddie, who had been checking up on everyone's travel plans regarding their wedding, Mike had pulled up the American Airlines website to purchase his ticket—and ended up sitting at his desk for over an hour, staring at the monitor without seeing it. For some strange reason, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. It was as if something final was hanging over him, and he wanted to prolong the inevitable drop as much as

possible.

Mike shrugs, even if he knows Will can't see him. "Yeah, maybe." He tilts his head towards the ceiling, willing his brain to come up with the right way to explain what he needs. "It's like, if I don't figure this out before the wedding, I'll lose my chance forever. Does that make sense?"

Will huffs out a soft laugh. "No," he replies. "But if you need to find yourself or whatever, I say go for it. You've always been a freak about the weirdest things."

"You're the freak," Mike retorts, but Will's advice has struck a chord within him, a faint glimmer of hope towards what may be the solution to his existential crisis. Even as the topic of their conversation shifts to how Steve is as a roommate, his best friend's words continue to circle around in his mind like a song played on loop.

Later that night, too wired up on a combination of caffeine and reckless hope to sleep, Mike finds himself scrolling through some backpacker's personal blog, reading through his extensive accounts of the many solo trips he'd taken in his youth, and how each one had changed his life for the better. The farther back Mike goes, the more the gears in his head start to turn.

He's got some money saved up, mostly guilt-ridden checks sent in by his dad, who he's barely spoken to since moving to New York for college, and whatever else he'd managed to earn from his part-time jobs over the years. Nancy and Jonathan won't be back for another three months after the wedding; he's got enough time to find a place to live once they're home. He can do this. He *wants* to do this.

It's times such as these that he sorely misses Will and Eleven more than he already does, because it's also times like these that Mike tends to make impulsive, stupid decisions that'll end up coming around to slap him in the face one way or another. Sometimes literally.

But Will is in Austin, helping Steve out with his students during the day and working on his artwork at night, and Eleven is in Paris,

already making waves across the fashion industry as the new face of Beverly Marsh's designs.

So when Mike clicks on a detailed itinerary for a road trip from New York to Los Angeles, along with the number of a cheap car rental service, there's no one around to stop him.

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"Let me get this straight," Dustin starts, his tone oddly clipped. "You're driving all the way here from New York, because, and I quote, you think it'll 'help you find yourself.'"

"Okay, it does sound kind of pathetic, but hear me out here," Mike tries to reason, but it's too late. Dustin bursts into raucous laughter that filters down the phone line, and to make things worse, Mike can also pick out the faint noise of Richie's gleeful cries in the background.

"Oh, man, Mike," Dustin says when he finally calms down. "We should have sent Will to check on you sooner."

"I *don't* need a babysitter," Mike protests, even though some part of him agrees that he maybe would benefit from a good punch in the teeth every now and then. "Am I on speakerphone?"

Dustin had moved in with Richie and Eddie right after their graduation from UCLA. Last Mike had heard, he and Richie are planning to try and make it into the radio business together. He already pities the poor souls who will be subjected to having to listen to a prolonged conversation between the two of them in the future.

"Is this part of your hipster phase?" Dustin goes on, ignoring his question, which means that Mike is most definitely on loudspeaker. He hates them all. "Lucas says your sudden aversion to Starbucks has something to do with working in Brooklyn."

"I am not a hipster and this is not a phase," Mike grits out, sounding exactly like a teenager who is going through a phase. "Tell Lucas he's one to talk." Lucas and Max live in Portland where they help manage a skate shop/organic food restaurant/vintage clothing line. They're

also currently *hitchhiking* their way to California.

But Dustin persists in trying to be rational for the first time in his life. “The wedding is in two weeks,” he tells him. “It’ll take you at least a week to get here. Maybe more, since you drive as slow as my grandma.”

“I know, okay?” Mike snaps. He runs a hand down his face in frustration, then his voice softens. “I’ll figure it out. I think—this is just one of those things I need to do.”

For all the hours he’s spent imagining wringing his neck, there’s also a reason Dustin remains to be one of his best friends in the world. “Do what you need to do, man,” he says sincerely. “Hey, maybe you’ll pick up a hot guy on the drive over here.”

Mike hangs up on him.

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Two days before Mike is set to leave, a wrench is thrown into his plans. Richie calls him in between a particularly bad bout of last-minute packing, and Mike picks up the phone and holds it up to his ear without a second thought.

“I have good news and I have bad news, Michael,” Richie says without preamble, sounding uncannily like Bob Barker. “Choose carefully now, my boy.”

Experience has taught him that Richie’s natural inclination towards the dramatic means that what he considers bad news isn’t always on par with, say, thinking he’d never see Eleven again, or finding out that Will was possessed by a monster known as the Mind Flayer. Having gotten through all of that, it’s pretty hard to get worked up over something such as having Richie accidentally send him a nude picture on email.

“Bad news first,” Mike says with a sigh. He wedges the phone between his ear and shoulder blade as he tries to ration the boxes of cereal and packets of crackers he’d picked up from the corner store on his way home from work.

"I need a favor," Richie replies instantly.

Mike gives him a few moments to add to this statement, but when nothing comes, he shifts his phone around, blinks in confusion. "That's the bad news?" he asks, his brows knitting together. "Then what's the good news?"

"The favor involves you maybe taking our very own Master Denbrough with you on this road trip?" Richie actually has the gall to sound upbeat about this, the asshole.

Mike immediately straightens up, all thoughts of essentials and snacks forgotten in the wake of Richie's answer. He's suddenly very grateful that he lives alone, because he has a feeling he's looking a lot like a baby deer caught in some hunter's trap right now.

"What?" His question rises to an embarrassingly high pitch, and his heart is beating unusually fast. "Why?"

"He had some minor surgery done recently." Mike can't see him, but he's positive Richie is wearing a shit-eating grin as he lays down the foundation for Mike's imminent nervous breakdown. "Nothing too complex, but his doctor still doesn't want him flying any time soon."

"But why do I have to take him?" Mike demands, trying to make sense of all the white noise in his head. "Can't he get a ride from someone else?"

Richie snorts. "No one else is dumb enough to try to drive all the way here from New York, Michael." Mike makes a grudging noise of agreement. "Besides, it won't kill you to have some company on this thing. You might even make it to the wedding on time."

"Fuck off," Mike says, but there's no real heat to it. "How is he supposed to get here from Maine if he can't fly?"

"Oh, you haven't heard?" Richie asks him, faux-innocent. "You and Big Bill are now neighbors. He moved to the city almost a week ago."

This is entirely too much for Mike to handle. "*What?*"

"You heard me," Richie replies, no doubt taking pleasure in Mike's

obvious horror. "You'll probably be seeing even more of him after the wedding. Think of this as a chance to get reacquainted with an *old friend*."

"Richie," Mike groans, picking up on the meaning beneath his words but refusing to acknowledge it.

But Richie just goes ahead and says it, anyway. "Don't act like you haven't been jonesing for Bill's bones since we were kids," he tells him. "Now that I think about it, you should be singing praises in my name."

Mike doesn't immediately reply, and Richie must be able to pick up on his obvious embarrassment, because he adds, "If it makes you feel better, he probably has no idea. The guy can write a four-hundred page novel with every detail plotted down to science, but he can never see what's right in front of him. Go figure."

Mike finally finds the willpower to speak. "I do not have a thing for Bill."

"Sure, you don't," Richie says, not even bothering to hide the obvious skepticism in his tone. "Oh! Beverly and Jane flew in this morning. Dustin's showing them around downstairs, but Jane said she wanted to talk to you. I'll go get her."

Richie clicks off and Mike uses the momentary break to try and piece together what remains of his sanity. He can't believe he's actually taking Bill Denbrough with him on a week-long drive across the country. Bill Denbrough, who he hasn't seen in years and most definitely does not have a thing for.

There's another soft *click* on the other end of the line, and a loaded stillness fills the space between them. Despite the fact that Eleven has lived in the real world as a normal person for approximately nine years, the two of them have never lost their ability to communicate somewhat telepathically. He can practically read the judgement in her silence.

"I'm sure Richie's told you everything," Mike starts. "I'm fine, by the way. Thanks for checking in with me every once in a while. I hope

Beverly isn't working you too hard."

El says nothing and Mike's forehead breaks out in a light sweat. "I mean, sure, I can't say I definitely *didn't* have a thing for Bill in the past, but I haven't seen him in almost three years. I'm totally over it."

Radio silence. Mike tries to quell the panic rising within him. He knows that El's got superpowers in the literal sense of the word, but sometimes he thinks her greatest skill is being able to see right through his bullshit.

"Alright, I may think of him on occasion. But it's just one of those things your mind does when you can't sleep at night." Then he realizes how his words could be interpreted and his eyes widen. "Not that I think about him when I can't sleep! It's all very platonic."

Still nothing from El. Mike can picture the expression on her face, clear as day. It's the one she usually wears when people are being particularly dense, or during the rare times Hopper tried to hide the Eggos from her before dinner. If he had to name it, he'd call it her No Bullshit Stare.

Mike gives up. "Fine," he says, throws his hands in the air in defeat. "Fine, I have a thing for Bill. I always have, okay? But sue me. The guy has perfect hair and would probably get *Lucas* to walk through fire for him, and that really means a lot, so stop judging me, El, and say something already."

"Mike?" Eleven's voice floats down the line, soft and confused. "Mike, are you there?"

He feels his insides begin to wither and die. "El?" he responds weakly.

"Dustin fell down the stairs," Eleven explains. "I just got to the phone. What were you saying?"

Mike hangs up on her.

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Mike first meets Bill the summer before he turns sixteen.

His parents finally call it quits a few months before freshman year, and his mom takes Holly and moves in with her sister, Mike's Aunt Maggie, in her old hometown of Derry, Maine. Mike stays behind in Hawkins with his dad, after both his parents agree that forcing a kid to move right before high school isn't the best idea.

It's a decision that leaves Mike equal parts grateful and pissed off. On one hand, he's glad not to have to abandon his friends before what are arguably the most formative years of their lives. On the other hand, it means that Mike ends up stuck in a house with Ted Wheeler, seeing as Nancy ran off to New York with Jonathan as soon as she was handed her high school diploma and hasn't looked back since.

He ends up spending a lot of time at the Byers residence, taking up space alongside El and Hopper, who are there even more than he is. El starts high school with them in the fall, and the abrupt culture shock paired with the sudden normalcy of their lives ends with the two of them realizing that while they are most definitely soulmates, their bond is more of the platonic kind.

Eleven's sudden, short-lived interest in Max and his ill-timed, short-lived crush on Will may also have something to do with their breakup. They commiserate over this as well.

Karen and Holly return to Hawkins over the Christmas break, where it's decided that Mike should spend his summers with them in Derry. His friends are less than enthusiastic about the prospect of a summer without their Dungeon Master.

"What is Derry, anyway?" Max asks him the night before he's set to leave, watching him stuff clothes into his suitcase. "I've never heard your mom mention it before."

"You're telling me," Mike says, shoving a stack of comic books into his backpack. "It's as if she didn't even remember she had a sister until she and my dad split up." He zips the bag closed and drops it onto the floor. "Oh, and I've got this random cousin who's supposed to be my age."

"This sucks, man," Lucas chimes in, moving to sit next to Max on Mike's bed. "But, hey, on the bright side, this Derry place can't be any worse than Hawkins, right?"

"Amen to that." Dustin glances up from the comic book he'd been flipping through and grins at Mike, baring his teeth like a shark. "Dude, you gotta let me know what the ladies are like up there," he says seriously. "Maybe I can get Steve to drive me over."

Will rolls his eyes, but the corner of his mouth quirks upwards despite himself. "It's a seventeen-hour drive, Dustin."

"Yeah, I doubt even Steve wants you to get laid that badly," Lucas adds, and he ducks right in time to avoid being hit by the pillow that Dustin hurls in his direction.

"We'll miss you, Mike," is all El adds to the conversation. She's been quiet most of the night, simply watching the rest of them sit around Mike's room and talk. But she's always had the skill of summing up a whole host of complex emotions into a few words, and Mike looks around at the faces of his best friends and nods.

"I'll miss you guys, too," he says, his throat a little tight. But they've all faced far greater things than a few short months apart. He has no doubt they'll be fine without him.

His mom picks him up from the airport in Bangor and the drive down to Derry is spent mostly in silence. Despite his obvious reservations about spending his summer with a bunch of people he barely knows, he has to admit that this place seems to have given his mom a peace she hadn't known back in Hawkins with his dad. It's enough to ease the anxiety in his gut a little.

Karen must be able to sense his nerves from the expression on his face. "It'll be okay, Mike," she says as they're driving through a series of identical, tree-lined streets. "Holly's settled in fine, and Richie's got a whole bunch of friends around your age."

Mike has to keep himself from pointing out that his extroverted

younger sister would befriend a rock if given the chance, and Mike has always had a little bit more trouble meeting new people, if the fact that he's had the same set of friends since kindergarten, give or take a few additions, is any indication.

"I guess so," he replies, attempting to sound more sure of himself than he feels.

They eventually stop in front of a modest, two-story house with painted window frames that's set far back on a lawn of dry grass and withering flowerbeds. Standing at the foot of a short staircase that leads up into the front door is a woman he assumes is his Aunt Maggie, if only because she looks exactly like his mom.

"Mike!" Aunt Maggie calls when he opens the car door and walks out into the summertime heat. "I haven't seen you since you were a baby."

Mike, who has no recollection of ever seeing her, just mutters, "Yeah, hi," at the same time his mom asks, "Is Richie around?"

Before his aunt can say anything, Mike picks up on the sound of loud chattering and thundering footsteps coming from somewhere inside the house. The noise grows more potent the closer it gets, and then a whole group of boys suddenly spill out onto the porch, talking over each other and laughing.

The boy Mike first locks eyes with is the tallest one out of the four of them, all messy brown hair and long, lanky limbs. His gaze lands on Mike as he stares at him with a mixture of interest and overt curiosity, one corner of his mouth already pulling into a half-smile, and Mike's stomach flips over. He *really* hopes this one isn't his cousin.

But that's temporarily forgotten the second his glance shifts to the right, to the boy standing next to him, mouth agape and eyes wide behind a pair of big, black frames, his Hawaiian-print shirt hanging open over a plain white T-shirt, because—because—

"Holy crow, Momma!" Richie yells, pointing a finger at Mike. "That boy there's stolen my face!"

“Oh my God,” the shortest boy says, looking from Mike to Richie and back. “There’s two of them.”

Mike turns to his mom in disbelief. “What the fuck?”

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It takes a while for Mike to come to terms with the fact that his mom never bothered telling him that he has an *identical twin* on the other end of the country. But what makes the whole thing even more absurd is the way his mom and Aunt Maggie brush it aside, like it’s something they hadn’t even noticed.

The two women disappear into the house, leaving Mike alone with his cousin and his friends. Richie is watching him warily, as if he’s waiting for Mike to vanish into a puff of smoke. To his credit, Richie’s Hot Friend seems to be more amused than confused by the situation, if the way he keeps sneaking deft glances at Mike means anything.

Finally, Richie breaks the silence. “This is fucked up.” He hops off the porch and bounds over to Mike, the sunlight reflecting off the frames of his glasses. “Mike, right? Richie is my name and doing Voices is my game.”

Mike’s forehead wrinkles in confusion. “Voices?”

“See, the dream is to make it into the radio business,” Richie tells him earnestly, like they aren’t practically strangers. “But where’s the fun in just plain ol’ talking? So I do Voices, all original and all me. You wanna hear one?”

“For fuck’s sake, Richie,” the smallest boy says, rolling his eyes. “Don’t subject him to one of your impressions right now. He already shares your face, don’t you think his life sucks enough?”

Richie begins to laugh hysterically. “A Good One!” he exclaims, his hand landing on the short boy’s shoulder with enough force to knock him down. “Eddie Kaspbrak Gets Off A Good One!”

“Stop hitting me, asshole!” Eddie pushes Richie’s hand off him and moves a few inches to his right. “I hate it when you do that.”

“Ah, you know you love it, Eds,” Richie replies fondly, sidling up to Eddie and slinging an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close to his side.

Eddie, Mike notes, doesn’t make much of an effort to break out of Richie’s hold. “Don’t call me Eds,” he adds. “I hate that even more.”

“Okay, let me rephrase that,” Richie says. “You know you love *me*, Eds.” Eddie’s cheeks deepen into a blush and Mike grows uncomfortable.

“Ignore them,” the curly-haired boy finally says. He takes a step forward and sticks his hand out at Mike. “They’ve been dating for almost a year. I’m Stan.”

“Don’t be jealous, Stan the Man,” Richie calls out, Eddie plastered to his torso. “You know there’s enough of me to go around.”

“I’d rather wade through a shit-pipe,” Stan deadpans, and that’s when the strangest thing happens. Stan’s body instantly grows rigid, and his pupils widen and begin to glaze over, like he’s reliving a particularly horrifying experience right in front of his eyes.

Behind him, Richie and his friends seem to have taken on the exact same stance, as if they’re seeing a being in front of them that isn’t really there. To make matters even more surreal, a bolt of terror suddenly rolls through Mike’s spine, cold as ice, but it’s gone in a flash before he can really pinpoint it.

Eddie is the first to recover. He shakes his head in an attempt to clear it, and then he elbows Richie’s Hot Friend in the side. “You still haven’t introduced yourself, Big Bill.”

“Big Bill?” Mike repeats, his mind immediately heading straight to the gutter and wondering if the nickname is a euphemism for something. His gaze surreptitiously darts down to Bill’s lower region, before he catches himself and his face bursts into flames. God, what is wrong with him?

Fortunately, Bill doesn’t seem to have noticed, much to Mike’s relief. “It’s just Bill,” he says, rolling his eyes, which happen to be the exact

color of the sky overhead. “Bill Denbrough.”

“Bill here has just learned how to say his whole name without stuttering,” Richie informs Mike, leaning forward like he’s divulging a juicy secret. “Isn’t that right, Bill?” he asks, glancing back at him from over his shoulder.

Bill’s reply is a flat, “Fuck off, R-Richie.” He catches Mike’s stare again and grins sunnily, the gesture going right through to Mike’s insides. “We w-were about to m-meet the others d-down by the quarry. You s-should c-c-come.”

Some of Mike’s earlier apprehension returns. “The others?”

Richie counts them off on his fingers. “Bev, Ben, and Mike, well, our Mike,” he says. “We’ll have to come up with nicknames for the two of you.”

“Because they look so similar,” Stan replies dryly.

Richie hooks his arm through Mike’s and drags him towards a rusty truck parked next door. “Come on, cuz. Let’s go introduce you to everyone else. They’re going to shit bricks.”

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Much to what Mike suspects is Richie’s disappointment, the others do not actually shit bricks upon meeting him.

He’s introduced to Beverly, who is tall, beautiful, and downright intimidating. Mike makes a mental note to text Dustin about her later. He also meets Ben, who offers him a warm smile and a bag of Oreos, and the other Mike, who is quite possibly the nicest guy Mike’s ever met.

They spend the rest of the afternoon down by the quarry, sunlight streaming in from overhead and the gentle sound of waves washing along the shoreline intermingling with sparse bits of conversation and the soft music coming from Richie’s portable speakers. Beverly eventually produces a pipe from the depths of her messenger bag as the sun begins to set, and she passes it around.

Mike has only been high one other time in his life, and he's still slightly unused to the way the weed makes the world blur and contract at the edges, as if everything around him has gone soft and fuzzy. He ends up staring fixedly at Bill, who is leaning back on his elbows, blue, blue eyes trained at the sky.

"Alright there, W-Wheeler?" Bill asks him, tipping his head languidly in Mike's direction. Earlier in the day, the group had decided to simply call each of the Mikes by their respective last names to avoid confusion for the rest of the summer.

"Peachy keen, jellybean," is Mike's intelligent response. He dissolves into a coughing fit, prompting Ben to sit up and whack him on the back to help him through it.

"On that note," Richie says, lying stretched out on the rocks, his head resting on Eddie's lap. "Welcome to the Losers Club."

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Bill is apparently the only one of Richie's friends that has his own car, and the whole group squishes into the backseat of his truck at the end of the day, while he drops everyone off at their houses. He drives up to Eddie's, and Richie slides out of the front seat—apparently he'd called shotgun times infinity—and tosses a, "Tell my mom I'll be home later!" at Mike as he goes.

"I think it's pretty cool your parents got you a car," Mike says. It's just him and Bill alone now, and he's mostly sobered up enough to reflect on what a joke he made of himself earlier. He resolves to never tell Lucas or Dustin about it if he ever wants to forget it happened.

Bill shrugs, taking caution to watch the streets in front of them, but Mike can see that his back has tensed slightly. "They d-don't really care what I d-do," he offers off-handedly, like it doesn't bother him.

Mike bites down on his bottom lip. "Oh." There's clearly more to this story than Bill is letting on, and it's ridiculous that Mike has only known this guy for a day, yet here he is, wishing he could somehow peel back all the layers a guy like Bill Denbrough has to him.

Then again, he did fall for Eleven after a week of her living in his basement. Maybe this is simply another one of those things.

“Thanks for the ride,” Mike says when Bill stops in front of Richie’s. The lights are on inside, which means that his mom is probably up and waiting for him, ready to bombard him with questions about his day. “I hope you don’t get back too late.”

Bill looks at him with open amusement sparkling in his blue eyes. “W-Well I l-live next d-door, s-so.” He grins as heat rises up to Mike’s neck, and he desperately hopes that it’s dark enough to cover his obvious shame. “Seriously, it’s n-not a p-problem.”

“Right.” Mike jabs his thumb in the direction of Richie’s front door, still flushing with embarrassment. He’s always been a little awkward and unsure around people he likes, but he doesn’t remember it ever being this bad. “I’m gonna go now.”

“Hey, Mike.” Bill’s voice is soft in the half-darkness, and there’s something eager, almost apprehensive, about the expression on his face. “I’m g-glad you’re s-spending the s-summer with us.”

“Same here,” Mike replies, and for the first time, he’s sure he really means it.

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Richie sneaks down to the guest bedroom a little after midnight, an hour after Mike finally managed to fend off his mom’s incessant stream of questions and escape to the privacy of his room.

He pokes his head around the bedroom door, his hair mussed and a dopey smile on his face. “It’s okay, you know,” Richie says by way of greeting. He edges into the room and settles himself down at the foot of Mike’s bed.

Mike pauses in the middle of typing out a text to Dustin regarding Beverly. “What is?”

“That you have a thing for Bill,” Richie replies promptly, and the blood in Mike’s veins turns to ice.

He opens and closes his mouth in rapid succession, but he's too properly stunned into silence to utter anything except an unintelligible mumble and a graceless, "Whaaaa—"

"Be soft, Michael." Richie holds up a hand to stop him, despite the fact that he hasn't been able to say anything. "We've all been there. This is simply a part of the natural cycle of life. We're born, we die, and in between that, we fall madly in love with Bill Denbrough."

Mike suspects that he must seem like a fish out of water, with how he's still openly gaping at Richie in horror. "I am not in love with Bill," he eventually forces out. The defiance in this statement is washed out by his obvious shock.

"Fine, you have a crush on him, you wanna jump his bones, blah, blah, blah," Richie says dismissively. "My point is, don't worry too much about it. You'll get over it. We all did." He tips Mike a wink as he tells him this, and then walks out of the room, leaving Mike alone with his thoughts.

Mike never quite musters up the courage to tell Richie that seven years later, he's still trying to get over it.

—

2017

Bill shows up at Nancy's apartment with a backpack slung over one shoulder, a duffel bag at his feet, a shopping bag crammed with what seems to be every cookie brand in New York right next to it, and a crate of Red Bull in his hands.

"You do know we'll be making stops along the way, right?" Mike ushers him into the apartment, trying to ignore the way his heart is pounding beneath his sweater. He hasn't seen the guy in three years and he's still as smitten as ever. He's glad to know that he has some consistency in him.

Bill's gaze darts down to the box in his hands and then he glances up at Mike, his smile tinged with guilt. "These are actually just leftovers from my college days," he admits. "I do my best writing at night."

"I lived with Stan, dude," Mike says, waving a hand at him. "Our senior year, I'm pretty sure I never saw him eat anything solid once."

Bill laughs and it does a lot to ease the air of slight tension in the room. "Great place," he says, surveying the space around them. The apartment is small but comfortable, even with the camp bed Mike sleeps on set up next to the windowsill. Stacks of books line the shelves and Jonathan's precious vinyl collection is arranged artfully inside a glass cabinet.

"Oh, this isn't mine," Mike clarifies. "It belongs to my sister and her boyfriend. I'm technically supposed to be looking for a roommate that'll take in a broke aspiring director before they get back."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I'm renting what used to be someone's closet," Bill replies with a grin. "But I guess it's what I deserve for deciding to move to New York to try and get a book published."

"To going broke for our dreams," Mike deadpans, hauling his rucksack over one shoulder.

"To going broke for our dreams," Bill echoes in the same serious tone, and the two of them burst into laughter.

The van that Mike had rented is parked about a block away from Nancy's apartment, and by the time they manage to lug everything down the stairs and into the backseat, a fine sheen of sweat has broken out across Mike's forehead and seeped its way into his curls. Beside him, Bill doesn't seem even remotely out of breath.

Once they're settled, Bill reaches into his backpack and pulls out a plastic bag stuffed with small bills. "Oh, before I forget. This is for you."

"Is that drug money or something?" Mike intones. "Because if you're on the run from the police, I think it's best to tell me now."

Bill rolls his eyes. "It's gas money. I had a part-time job working for my university library all throughout college," he explains. "I figured it was unfair to have you pay for everything, since I'm pretty much crashing your trip."

“Hey, dude, it’s fine,” Mike assures him. He thinks it’s best that Bill never finds out why exactly he’s doing Mike a favor by being here. “I probably would have died doing this alone.”

“I’m happy to keep you alive, then,” Bill says, tone sincere. Mike has to fight to keep his features composed.

Here he is: half-asleep and broke as all hell, about to embark on a six-day journey across the country to get to his cousin’s wedding, with only said cousin’s best friend—whom Mike still on occasion thinks of as Richie’s Hot Friend—for company.

He really hopes he makes it out of this alive.

Mike turns the key and the engine roars to life, the sound signalling the beginning of something exciting and intangible, a promise in the air of untold tales and their endless possibilities. “Ready to go, Denbrough?”

Bill leans back in his seat, stretches his arms above his head. “Whenever you are, Wheeler.”

2. some kind of wonderful

2012

The summer before his senior year of high school, Mike's friends decide that they finally have enough of Mike ditching them for a mysterious group of kids every year. His mom and Holly had moved into their own house a few blocks away from Richie's, and this prompts them into planning an impromptu visit to Derry, making the long drive there in Dustin's minivan.

The Party falls into the Losers like they've known each other their whole lives, and seeing everyone speaking over each other as if they aren't virtual strangers, something rights itself in Mike's chest, observing as his two sets of friends blend into one loud, obnoxious group. Dustin and Richie take one look at each other and start talking like long-lost siblings, while Ben and Will immediately get into a debate on art.

It's while Eddie tries to lecture an incredibly confused Max on the inherent dangers of skateboarding, Lucas and Mike Hanlon compare vintage magazine collections, and Stan and Bill discuss the finer points of *Blade Runner*, that Beverly sidles up to where Mike and Eleven are standing, a wicked gleam in her eye.

"Hi," she says, flashes Eleven a wide smile. "I'm Bev."

El glances over at her, and it's only because Mike knows her so well that he's able to spot the unmistakable interest on her face as she takes in the tall redhead in front of them. She hesitates for a beat, and then she nods. "I'm Jane."

Despite the fact that she'll always be Eleven to him, Mike understands her sudden need to be her own person, someone separate from the links to her painful past. Here in Derry, surrounded by a group of people who know nothing about the trauma they've faced, it's finally her chance to start from the beginning.

Later that night, everyone gathers together out on the quarry, huddled around a bonfire that Ben skillfully coaxes out of a few dead

twigs, much to El's amazement. Mike sits on an outcropping of rock a little away from the group, drinking in the mix of chatter, laughter, and the swell of music that flows through the sky.

"Hey," says a voice coming from his right. Mike would be able to place it pretty much anywhere.

Bill settles himself down on the rock next to him, the space between their bodies radiating a heat that has nothing to do with the fire in front of them. They fall silent, watching Lucas dip Max gracefully to the music, while Dustin attempts the same with an amused Beverly. El, Mike Hanlon, and Ben are watching a video on Ben's phone, and Stan and Will are discussing Jewish traditions. Richie and Eddie are nowhere to be found. Mike doesn't want to know.

Bill speaks up first. "Your f-friends are p-pretty cool," he says. He's staring intently at the flames, the blaze reflected on his eyes dancing along with the wind. "D-Dustin seems like h-he's going to p-propose."

Mike laughs, stops himself short of telling Bill he doesn't think it's *Dustin* that Beverly is interested in from his friends. "Yeah, well, I guess I owe you guys for letting me into your group every year after all."

There's a short break in the conversation, and then Bill says, "You w-wanna know s-something? I really m-missed you this year." He finally turns to Mike, as if willing him to uncover the deeper meaning to his confession. "I m-miss you every year. R-Richie s-says I get all p-pissy whenever you leave."

Mike feels his heart stop. "I missed you, too, Big Bill," he admits freely. *I miss you the most*, he doesn't add.

The air surrounding their area suddenly contracts into a space made for only the two of them, a bubble that keeps the rest of the world at bay for the time being. The night overhead is a little darker, the sound of their friends' conversations drops down into a whisper. Bill's gaze darts to his lips, Mike inches forward, doesn't let Bill pull away

"There you guys are!"

Richie's yell pulls them back into reality, and the glass shatters, the two of them springing apart like elastic bands, startled and confused. Bill's cheeks are tinged pink and Mike steadies himself, takes a few deep breaths to calm the way his heart is reindeer-prancing inside his ribcage.

Mike notes, with a fair amount of bitterness, that Richie's hair is more unruly than it normally is, and he's wearing his shirt on backwards. How he manages to convince Eddie to do anything with him on a surface that isn't a bed with clean sheets is a superpower only Richie Tozier possesses.

"Why are you guys sitting all the way over here?" he demands, then yanks Mike to his feet without waiting for an answer. Bill pushes himself upwards and follows suit. "Haystack's just brought out a shitload of marshmallows and you're missing out on them!"

"I really hate you sometimes, Richie," Mike says with feeling.

"I love you, too, Mikey." Richie blows him a kiss, then winces when Bill, out of nowhere, digs his elbow into his side. Richie rounds on him, affronted. "What the fuck was that for?"

Mike meets Bill's eyes, wishes he could read the emotions swirling around in them. "Nothing," Bill replies.

—

2013

The last time the whole group gets together is the summer after high school graduation. Everyone gathers in the Barrens, sprawled out under the shade of a massive oak tree, grass beneath their backs and the gurgling of a nearby stream rushing by in the background, and they trade news on college.

Lucas and Max are heading off to Reed College in Oregon, and after studying his ass off for the SATs all year, Dustin lands a place at UCLA, where he discovers to his delight Richie and Eddie will also be attending. Will eventually chooses the Savannah College of Art and Design, and he finds out that Ben's going there as well.

Beverly announces that she's finally chosen to move to Chicago for college, and El, who had gotten into every school she applied for—Mike supposes having an essay entitled “My Life as a Top Secret Government Experiment” would impress *any* panel of assessors—says that life in Chicago doesn't sound too bad to her. Mike doesn't miss the soft smile Bev sends her way as she does.

Mike is going to NYU in the fall, after painstakingly compiling an entire portfolio of footage for Tisch, and Stan grins at him before telling him that he's just about decided on New York (“Jew York,” Richie says, which earns him a punch from Eddie). To his surprise, Bill and Mike Hanlon are staying in Maine, after receiving scholarships to the university in Bangor, and are considering renting a place together in town.

“To us,” Beverly says when the sun begins to set. She raises a bottle of the beer that Bill had nicked from his kitchen. El's head is resting on her shoulder, and Mike feels a small pang of jealousy, watching them. “To the Losers Party.”

“To the Losers Party,” they all echo in unison. The beer is cold in his hand, the taste almost bittersweet.

Mike takes another swig from his drink, glances at Bill, who is sitting to his right, and mentally calculates the distance that will always be between them, wonders if he would have had the guts to act on it if they wouldn't always be so far apart.

—

2017

They switch seats four hours into the drive to Cleveland, and Bill immediately puts his music privilege to use, lining up a whole host of eighties songs as the two of them sing along, almost swerving the car into the side of a truck when he gets too into the beat of “Take On Me.”

“Woah there.” Mike laughs, raises his hands as if in surrender. “I like A-ha as much as the next guy, but this song is seriously too overplayed to be worth getting killed over.”

Bill drums his fingers lightly against the steering wheel. "This was one of my little brother's favorite songs." The smile that stretches across his mouth is nostalgic, tainted with a touch of melancholy. "He used to go nuts every time my dad played it."

It's a nice memory, but Mike frowns, thoroughly confused. "I didn't know you have a brother." In all the years he's known Bill, all the summers he's spent by his side in Derry, Mike can't recall ever seeing anyone inside Bill's dark and perpetually empty house.

"I did," Bill says, his voice soft. It's only then that his usage of the past tense dawns on Mike. "He died when I was twelve."

"Fuck," is Mike's eloquent and thoughtful reply. "Shit, I had no idea. I'm sorry."

Bill shakes his head, as if to reassure him. "It's fine," he says. Mike watches as lightness gradually returns to his expression. "I don't really remember anything about it, to be honest."

Mike nods to himself and doesn't say anything more on the subject. Grief is a tricky thing, and he understands that it's often overpowering in the manner it drains a person of all sense of space and time, the days blending into the next with no real movement. Hell, he barely remembers the two days he thought Will had died for real.

Then the opening notes of "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" filter through the air, and the two of them speed down the I-80, belting out the lyrics as loud as they can.

—

They get to Cleveland a few minutes past nine, and the steady grumbling sound Mike's stomach had been making as they drove the last two miles prompts Bill to pull over next to a deli on the side of the road. Bill buys two corned beef sandwiches, which they eat sitting on the hood of the rental car, sharing a can of Red Bull between them.

"Oh, God, this is the best sandwich I've ever had." Mike snaps a

picture of his half-eaten dinner before he demolishes it completely. "Max loves corned beef. She's going to be so jealous when I send this to her."

"Beverly does, too," Bill says, gesturing at Mike with his own piece of sandwich. Then he laughs. "I think she even tried to smuggle some in her suitcase when she left for Paris."

Mike snorts. "It probably didn't fit in with the boxes of Eggos I know El tried to pack in with her stuff."

"I guess this means they're exactly right for each other," Bill muses, seeming thoughtful. "Will told me that you and Jane used to date. What happened there?"

Mike swallows down the bit of food he's still chewing before he answers. "Well, we were kids for one." He shrugs. "I dunno, I suppose the older we got the more we realized it was just puppy love stuff," he says, because telling Bill the root of their relationship had been shared trauma isn't on the table.

"That's what happened with me and Bev," Bill tells him, and Mike glances at him, surprised. He didn't know that. "She dated Ben for a bit, too, and then somewhere along the way she realized she prefers girls." He laughs a little self-consciously. "I still feel like the biggest idiot for being the last to figure it out."

"No, you?" Mike drawls, voice dripping with sarcasm. "I would never have pegged you as the clueless type."

Bill nudges him lightly with his shoulder. "I know, I know," he says. "Last year, Richie told me he used to have a crush on me. I had no idea." Then he pauses. "The funny thing is, I used to have a crush on Richie, too."

Mike almost spits out a mouthful of Red Bull. "Seriously?"

"This was long before he got with Eddie," Bill assures him. "But technically, if I wasn't so clueless, Richie and I would have dated and you and I wouldn't be sitting in a parking lot in Cleveland, on the way to their wedding."

“Oh, so that’s what this is,” Mike deadpans. “I’m a stand-in for who you *really* want.”

“Crap, you caught me,” Bill replies in the same droll tone. He crumples his sandwich wrapper into a ball and chucks it into a nearby bin. “It’s getting late, we should probably head out.” Mike nods reluctantly.

The motel they check into is dark and eerie, with thin walls and loud pipes. The threadbare carpet does nothing to disguise the loose floorboards underneath, and simply walking back from the bathroom causes every single one to creak in protest. The walls are painted the strangest shade of orange Mike has ever seen. He feels like they’re going to be victims in a murder movie.

Bill must be thinking the same, because he reaches over and flicks the table lamp on. “Do you mind if we leave the light on?” he asks. “I don’t do very well in the dark.”

“Neither do I,” Mike admits, stark honesty weaving its way into his confession. The first month after El closed the Gate, he hadn’t been able to sleep at all.

“Cool.” Bill smiles at him from across the side table that separates their beds. In the gentle brightness from the lamp, his features are soft, a little blurred. “Thanks again for letting me come with you, Mike.”

“Don’t mention it,” Mike says. He lies back on his own set of lumpy pillows and stares at the cracks along the ceiling, wishes he could tell Bill how he’s never had much of a choice when it comes to him.

—

Bill insists they can’t stop in Chicago without visiting Millennium Park, so they ditch the car in the parking lot of a nearby hostel and wander slowly around downtown. There’s something in the fullness of the streets and the brightness of the day that reminds Mike of New York, but the air around them is a lot less frantic, less fast-paced. The sidewalks are definitely cleaner.

They stop in front of the Cloud Gate, staring up at the vast steel structure in awe. Bill snaps a picture of Mike watching his distorted reflection move along the sleek surface and sends it off to his friends, beams when he catches sight of Mike's annoyed glare.

"Ben says this park is a historic milestone in the development of urban architecture in a city center," Bill says, reading out loud from his phone. "We're apparently really lucky to be here right now."

Mike can only imagine how disappointed Ben will be if they don't stay and appreciate the park for a little longer. "I don't mind hanging out here for a while," he says.

They sit on a bench overlooking the rest of the park and trade stories on college, the more nuanced, everyday ones that are often forgotten in favor of wilder tales. Bill tells him about arguing with his creative writing professor, and Mike is laughing by the time Bill gets to the climax of his account: stapling a drop card for the class to a publication slip from a magazine he'd sold one of his short stories to.

"I'm surprised I didn't get suspended," Bill admits. "I actually wanted to tie the note to a rock and throw it through the window of his office. But Mike managed to stop me in time."

Mike blinks at him. "Yeah, maybe that wouldn't have been the smartest move."

Bill lifts a shoulder, totally unconcerned. "It would have served him right."

"You'll get your revenge when your novel is published," Mike says. "You can even dedicate the entire book to him."

Bill grins dreamily. "That'll be something." Then his expression falls slightly. "If I ever get it published. Sometimes I have no idea what I was thinking, moving to New York."

"If there's anyone here who has got their shit together, it's you, Big Bill." Mike blows out a sigh. "When I told my dad I was going to New York to study film, he told me I would be back in Hawkins in less than a week."

It still stings a bit when he recalls the last conversation he'd had with his dad in person. His mom had been more than supportive, as had Nancy, who had immediately taken him around once he arrived. But all the same, he had hoped that living with his dad for four years would have been enough to warrant his approval somehow.

"And yet you survived," Bill says firmly, his eyes hyper-focused on Mike's face. "And you're going to keep surviving." His words leave Mike raw and cracked open, like Bill is digging all the way into his core. "For the record, I have no idea what I'm doing. But we can figure that out together."

"I'd like that," Mike says honestly, the breeze surrounding them thick with warmth.

They're waiting at the crosswalk headed back into town when Bill suddenly stops, turns to him. "If my book ever gets published and it's made into a movie, I want you to direct it."

Mike's lips curl into a slow and pleased smile. "It's a deal," he says, and they shake on it.

—

Richie calls him a few miles outside Omaha, where Bill spots a convenience store and almost drives the car through the front window in his haste to stock up on more trail mix. Mike is waiting for him in the passenger seat, the window rolled down halfway to let in the light breeze from overhead.

"How you doin', Mikey?" Richie asks him, voiced laced with its usual upbeat tenor. "I just wanted to check up on you, make sure you haven't killed my best man and what not."

Mike snorts. "Bill is Eddie's best man," he says. "Stan is yours. Also, aren't you getting married in a courthouse?"

"Stan is co-best man with Beverly," Richie corrects, ignoring the second half of his statement. "He and the other Mikey arrived yesterday. Lucas and Max got here this morning. Shit, you should hear the stories *they* have."

Mike thinks he would almost be irrationally jealous by how much cooler Lucas and Max's alternative lifestyle adventures compare to his campy, self-discovery road trip if he wasn't also being accompanied on this thing by Bill. Therefore, he's got no room to complain.

"Bill is fine," Mike assures him, rolling his eyes. "We should be there in three days as planned."

"So." Richie's voice drops down an octave, and Mike is pretty sure that he's leering at him from over the phone. "You two planning to bone on this—ow, motherfucker!"

There's a sound of a scuffle occurring on the other end, a burst of static, and then Eddie says, "Hey, Mike, I'm so sorry about him." He can hear Richie complaining in the background. "How are you guys?"

"We're fine, Eddie," Mike tells him. Before he'd left, Eddie had sent them both an insanely long and detailed note to be safe and avoid blind curves as much as possible, because apparently Satanic cults liked to wait on the other side and attack drivers. Mike had laughed for a full minute after reading it. "No attacks so far."

"You can never be too careful," Eddie reminds him. "I hope you two are being safe." Then, because dating Richie for the last eight years must have rubbed off on him somehow, he adds, "I hope you're being safe with the other stuff, too."

Mike's mouth falls open in surprise, but before he can even think about stringing a coherent reply together, he hears Richie yell, "Oh my God, Eds, I love you!" and the line goes dead.

Bill returns a few minutes later, arms weighed down by two plastic bags filled to the brim with small cardboard boxes, and he pointedly doesn't ask about the flush spreading from Mike's neck all the way up to his hairline, or why he spends the rest of the drive into Omaha staring blankly into space.

—

They spend the afternoon at the Joslyn Art Museum because Mike

claims that Bill's endless loop of Morrissey and Joy Division is frying his brain into mush, and admission into the museum is free for the day. The building is small but beautiful, with marble floors and wide windows that stretch up into a high, peaked ceiling.

They decide to ditch the guided tour in favor of getting lost through the rows of Greek pottery, attempting to outdo each other with how much of Greek mythology they actually remember. Even though Mike is certain the art painted on the pots and vases has nothing to do with them, he's still elated when he comes out victorious.

"See, the different colors clearly represent the artist's struggle with his identity," Bill says, faux-serious. They're standing in front of a massive sculpture made out of colored glass, the reds, blues, greens, and yellows twisting together as it winds its way up to the ceiling. "The light shifting around is proof that he had no idea who he was."

"More like you have no idea what you're talking about," Mike counters, and the sound of their joint laughter bounces around the walls of the hall and echoes back to them, loud and clear.

"Will would be so disappointed in me right now," Bill affirms with a decisive nod. "We should probably leave all the art talk to him and Ben."

They walk out of the museum and sit on a wide ledge outside the front entrance, one that overlooks the vast lawn that surrounds the building. Mike tells Bill about Will's attempts to start a bi-weekly poetry night late into their sophomore year, which had culminated in Dustin and Lucas competing on who could come up with the dirtiest metaphor. To everyone's surprise, El had won that round.

"I wish we had grown up together," Bill says, wiping tears of laughter from the corner of his eye. "Hawkins seems like a hell of a lot better place than Derry."

"That's funny," Mike muses. "I always thought the same about Derry." Despite El closing the Gate doing a lot to return their town to its normal, pre-Upside Down state, Mike's sure he'll never feel truly safe there ever again.

Bill shakes his head. “Derry has its secrets, too,” he starts, his voice shifting into the same cryptic tone that all the Losers take on when they discuss their hometown. No one has ever said as much and Mike has never asked, but he’s got a gut feeling there’s more to Derry than he realizes.

“But Mike stayed,” Mike points out. Bill told him that Mike Hanlon had returned to Derry after graduation, where he now works for the town’s public library. It seemed like a pretty weird job for someone as brilliant as Mike, but he didn’t question it much.

“You know, Mike was offered a research position at Stanford,” Bill says, a faraway look on his face, eyes glazed over with a past Mike can’t reach. “But he turned it down. He said he *needed* to be back in Derry. Sometimes, I think he knows something the rest of us don’t. Honestly, I’m not even sure I *want* to know what he does.”

Mike has no idea if it’s the chill that runs through his body upon listening to Bill talk, or the fact that Bill looks downright terrified. It’s an expression that Mike knows well, has seen it on his reflection in the mirror, on the faces of his friends as they battled a demonic entity for the second time. He reaches over, twines his fingers through Bill’s right hand. If he asks, he’ll say it’s nothing more than an act of comfort, of solidarity.

But Bill doesn’t ask. Instead, he squeezes Mike’s hand even tighter in his grip, and the two of them sit like that, lost in their own individual thoughts, until the sun begins to set.

—

“Richie says he’s highly disappointed in us,” Bill remarks. They’re sitting outside a small pizza parlor in downtown Denver, holding paper plates in their hands as they lean against the wall. If Mike never sees another box of cereal again, it’ll be too soon.

Mike takes a bite of his slice, raises his eyebrows. “Why?”

Bill sets his plate aside and pulls his phone from his back pocket, peers at the screen intently. “He says he can’t believe we’ve lasted this long without a single night out.”

Mike scoffs. "Tell Richie that not everyone's idea of fun is getting blackout drunk and picking fights with bouncers." He has, unfortunately, witnessed his cousin do both these things many times.

"That's what I said!" Bill exclaims, grinning. His phone vibrates again and he stares at the messages flooding his screen. "He sent me a list of Denver's famous bars." He taps the link and begins scrolling through it. "Some of these seem pretty interesting. You wanna check one out?"

Mike sighs. "Might as well." He wipes his hands and tosses his plate into a nearby dumpster. "You know he'll never shut up about it if we don't."

Bill glances at the list on his phone once more, then up at Mike, a slow, sly smile stretching out from one corner of his mouth. "How do you feel about line dancing?"

—

The Grizzly Rose has to be the most horrific thing Mike has ever seen. He and Bill enter through a set of double doors into a huge room filled with people moving to country music in synchronized steps. There doesn't seem to be anyone under the age of forty present, and Mike spots an actual mechanical bull in the corner.

"I fucking hate you, Denbrough!" Mike yells, trying to be heard over the noise. Bill laughs all the way to the bar.

Somehow, through Bill's powers of gentle persuasion, or possibly because Mike is the world's biggest sucker, he is coerced into joining a new round of line dancing, where a sixty-year-old woman dressed like a ranch owner cheerfully hooks her arm through his and leads him out onto the dance floor.

The music is loud and harsh, the lights shining on the dancers below almost blinding. There's a man wearing a cowboy hat and heavy buckled boots standing on a raised platform, tapping his toe to the beat and calling out the different moves. Sharon, his partner, is a deft dancer, quick on her feet, and despite confusing the order of the steps a few times, Mike finds that he's actually enjoying himself.

He and Bill eventually lose their respective partners in the crowd and gravitate towards each other, where Mike realizes that Bill is a truly awful dancer. He feels strangely drunk, and he knows it's not from the one beer he had, but from Bill himself, who keeps tripping over his own two feet, and who has been shooting Mike these shy, uncertain glances all day, cocooned in the safety of their rental car, while the world around them flew past.

Bill moves to take a sip from the beer in his hand, but Mike covers the neck of the bottle and pulls him in, surging forward so that their kiss is wet and deep. Bill makes a surprised sound at the back of his throat, but he shifts around, digs his fingers into Mike's hips and pulls them closer together. People keep jostling them around as the song goes on, but Mike couldn't care less.

Eventually, Bill pulls back, panting slightly. "Was that because of the beer?"

From over Bill's head, Mike catches the wink Sharon sends his way. "Not even a little bit," he says, and kisses him again.

—

"I wish we had done that earlier," Bill says. They're lying side by side on one of the motel room's twin beds, hands intertwined, watching shadows move along the walls. Somehow, the darkness doesn't seem quite as scary as it was before. "Years earlier."

Mike struggles to sit up, turns over so that he's facing Bill. "You liked me even then?"

"I've always liked you," Bill states, like it's a fact, one so unquestionable that Mike can hardly doubt its validity. "I used to hate the summer, but after you started showing up, it became my favorite season."

"God, we wasted so much time." Mike flops back onto his pillow, sneezes when a cloud of dust rises up in response to this abrupt movement. "Why didn't you ever do anything about it?" he asks Bill softly.

He feels Bill shrug next to him. “I think I was scared. You were always going to be so far away.” He laughs, a self-deprecating sound. “It’s the same reason why I didn’t try to keep in touch while we were at school. I didn’t want to risk having something happen for it to just fall apart.”

Mike thinks of Eleven and Beverly, of the way El’s face had lit up every time she received a text from her, of the subtle manner his stomach would clench as he watched them build a relationship from a few hundred miles away. *It wouldn’t have fallen apart*, he wants to say. *We would have made it work*.

Instead, Mike nods into the darkness. “Distance is a bitch.”

Bill squeezes his hand once. “We’re here now,” he says.

“Yeah,” Mike replies, and he suddenly feels like he can breathe easily again, maybe for the first time in his life. “Yeah, we are.”

—

The next day, they drive into Salt Lake City. They spend the entirety of their short stay inside the motel room, making out. Among other things.

—

They decide to bypass Vegas and drive through the night, and the idea of entering that final stretch of the journey into Los Angeles doesn’t feel quite as daunting as it would have been if Mike had set out on this long drive alone. They take turns navigating as the night grows darker around them. Bill outlines a few of his stories and Mike describes how he would film each one.

It’s Mike at the wheel now, the headlights reflecting nothing by the empty highway in front of them. The numbers of the clock on the dash change to three, and he tells Bill everything. He talks about Will’s disappearance and the Upside Down and Eleven’s true origins. He tells Bill about the Shadow Monster and Bob and how mean he was to Max when she first started hanging out with them, and how it would have served him right if Richie had been the same to him

when he came to Derry. He even talks about his parents, how wrong they were for each other, how his dad still doesn't know he likes boys, but he can't imagine he'd react in any way that would surprise him.

Bill's eyes are wide by the time he finishes talking, and he chances a glance at Mike before returning his gaze to the road. "You mean that Jane—Jane's real name is *Eleven*?"

"No, technically her real name is Jane," Mike clarifies. "But she'll always be Eleven to us. Didn't you guys ever wonder why we call her El?"

"Of course we did," Bill replies, clearly still struggling to process the massive information overload. "But we figured it was some sort of inside joke. You've obviously known her for a lot longer than we have." He exhales, long and slow. "God, and she's got real *superpowers*."

"I know this all sounds really hard to believe," Mike begins, but Bill cuts him off with a rather vicious shake of his head.

"No, it's not." Bill swallows audibly, as if preparing himself for battle. He's pointedly looking at everything but Mike, his jaw clenched. "There's actually a few things I want to tell you."

Mike watches him attempt to collect his thoughts, grappling with himself internally. "There's no rush," he reminds Bill. "I'm not going anywhere."

He drives for a few more miles before Bill speaks again. "I told you that my brother died when I was twelve," he says. Mike nods, encouraging him to go on. "But I can't *remember* how he died. I just know that something happened to us when we were kids, something bad." He takes a deep breath and continues. "There's something evil that lives in Derry, and I don't remember what it is or what we did, all I know is that we faced it once before."

Mike takes one hand off the steering wheel and searches around blindly for Bill's own in the dark. He catches it and threads their fingers together. Bill goes on. "I also told you that Mike returned to

Derry for a reason, and I think that reason has to do with what we did as kids. Something tells me that it's not over, that whatever haunts Derry is still out there." He finally turns towards Mike, open fear etched across his features. "We made a promise to finish it once and for all when it comes back. But the truth is, I'm terrified. I don't even know what happened, only that it should have killed me even then. I don't want to ever go back, but I know that one day, I'll have to. The worst part is, no matter what happens, I will."

They lapse into silence for another couple of miles, and then Mike blows out a sigh. "If you have to go back," he starts, the words coming out slow and stilted, lodged in his throat alongside everything he's ever said in his life that's held meaning. Every, *I can't lose you again*. Every, *It was the best thing I've ever done*. "If you have to go back, I'll come with you."

Bill opens his mouth to object, but Mike rushes on before he can contradict him. "I won't pretend to understand what you're going through. But if there's anything I've ever learned about fear," he says, the images of his Party swimming to the forefront of his mind, "it's that you should never face it alone."

"I'm not going to be alone," Bill points out, but his voice is quiet, hushed, without any real bite to it.

Mike shrugs. "Richie's my family," he says. "I've got a moral obligation to see him through whatever shit he gets himself into." He laughs softly. "He would do the same for me."

"Yeah," Bill replies, the tension in his body seeping away with each passing minute. "He would."

They turn into Nevada as the clouds part and the first streaks of dawn begin to break out across the vast and empty sky overhead. The two of them bask in the stillness of the moment, the rental car speeding quietly down the highway, heading straight into the growing brightness of a new day ahead.

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Los Angeles is almost nothing like New York, with its wide, open

streets bursting with life and sound, cars honking on the road and tourists swarming the shops like flies, buzzing in the heat of the summer sunshine. They arrive in the city close to ten in the morning, fatigue settling on his bones as he and Bill trudge up the stairs heading to Richie's apartment.

Bill is practically asleep on his feet, his head resting on Mike's shoulder and their hands interlocked, as they wait outside the front entrance for someone to let them in. From their side of the wall, he can hear the chatter of his friends, the murmur of voices blending into one haze of familiar noise. Then a set of footsteps move in their direction and the door is yanked open.

In his state of exhaustion, Mike takes everything in slowly. Richie is beaming at him, glasses askew on his face, as he pulls the door open wide to reveal a small living room. Lucas, Max, and Stan are talking quietly over a round dining table. Beverly and El are curled up on one side of an L-shaped couch, while Ben and Will flip through a stack of wedding magazines on the other. Mike Hanlon, Eddie, and Dustin are standing in the kitchen, clearly debating something.

The apartment is barely big enough for three people, let alone thirteen, but it reminds Mike of the endless summer nights spent in his basement in Derry, his friends crammed into sleeping bags like kids at a daycare center, their stuff spread out all over the place like it had belonged to them alone. It's the Losers Party, back together again, as they always should be.

Richie opens his mouth, no doubt to make some kind of smart comment, but he glances downwards, notices their joined hands, then yells, "Fucking finally!" The entire room explodes into cheers, and Mike has the strangest sense of coming home at last.

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The wedding is nothing more than a short civil ceremony at the courthouse, but with the amount of preparation and yelling that had been the result of thirteen people trying to use two bathrooms at the same time, Mike is left exhausted enough to think that a banquet of three hundred guests at the Plaza would have been easier to coordinate. Eddie's mom bursts into loud tears when the judge

declares her son a married man, and though Richie's parents seem a bit uncomfortable by the proceedings, Mike can detect a trace of genuine happiness for their son.

They celebrate that night on the rooftop of the apartment complex, which Beverly, Max, El, and Ben had done up with wreaths of flowers and fairy lights molded into intricate patterns that weave along the concrete walls. Eddie expresses surprise at how the four of them managed to string the lightbulbs up so high, and El simply winks at him. It's a reception that consists mainly of pizza and beer, plus a crate of champagne the others had splurged on as a wedding present.

Richie's phone is hooked up to the speakers, the music constantly shifting from mainstream pop hits into more eclectic ones such as Japanese funk songs. Everyone is drunk on a combination of the alcohol and each other, and the buzz from Mike's insides spreads out all over his body, buoying him up until he feels like he could float away into the dark. Below him, the city lights of Los Angeles shimmer in the distance.

Eleven and Beverly make their way over to him, tipping unsteadily on their feet, arms locked around each other. "I see you two finally got your shit together," Beverly says, her blue eyes sparkling in the brightness. "Congrats."

"I already heard it from everyone else, Bev," Mike tells her, rolling his eyes fondly. "There's no need to give me the shovel talk."

The day before, every single Loser had somehow made it a point to let him know what precisely was on the line for his balls should he ever hurt their precious leader. He'd have been more offended if Bill hadn't also come out of Dustin's room, a very triumphant Max and an equally as stunned Lucas, trailing after him.

But Beverly waves his claims aside. "Nah, I know you're not going to hurt him," she says. "Because if you do, El here will sic her powers on you."

Eleven nods empathetically. "Bill is good for you," she adds. "I'm happy that you're happy, Mike."

“Same goes with you two,” he replies. He wants to tell her more, wants to tell her that he’ll never regret loving her, that maybe things always work out in the way they’re supposed to. But he doesn’t need to. The smile on El’s face lets him know that she understands him loud and clear.

Beverly drags Eleven off to dance when a slower song comes on, and Mike stays put, watches the couples swaying out on the dance floor. Will is talking animatedly with Luke, one of Eddie’s friends from college, while Dustin attempts to flirt with Rosa, their Swedish neighbor. Mike Hanlon is dancing with Richie’s former RA, while Ben and Stan stand by the drinks table, chatting up a pair of girls from down the hall.

“Where’s your new man?” someone from behind him asks, and Mike spins around, finds himself gazing into a pair of eyes that are almost identical to his own, if not for the glasses blocking the way.

“Fuck off, Richie,” Mike says, grins. “Shouldn’t you be dancing with your new husband?” he teases, intentionally drawing the last word out.

Richie glances over to where Eddie is standing by Bill, right underneath a string of lights fashioned into the shape of a huge heart. There are hearts reflected on his eyes when he turns back to Mike, the dopiest smile across his mouth. “I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that word,” he admits.

Mike nudges him with his shoulder. “You have a whole week at a five-star hotel to work around it,” he says. The hotel stay had come as a gift from all of them, courtesy of Eleven’s brand new modeling contract. “Lucky you, I’m not excited about having to share a room with Dustin for the rest of the weekend.”

Richie sniggers into his hand. “We’ll try our best to get over the honeymoon phase before we come home,” he says, and Mike begins to laugh. He definitely doesn’t envy Dustin right now.

“I’m really happy for you, Rich,” he tells him, tone sincere. It’s funny, how he hadn’t even known who Richie was for most of his life, and yet he’s sure he would do absolutely anything for his cousin. “I’m

glad I came.”

Richie fixes him with a serious stare. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

Mike tilts his head to the right, catches sight of Bill, laughing at something on the other side of the roof deck, and his stomach slowly starts to fill with butterflies. He bites down on his lip, not hard enough to hide his smile. Richie follows the line of his gaze and smirks, smugness radiating off him in waves.

“You know I did, asshole.” Mike shoves him lightly, pushing him in Eddie’s direction. “Stop talking to me and go dance with your husband, Trashmouth.”

“Yes, sir.” Richie gives him a little salute and then disappears into the crowd. Mike sees him pop up on the other end of the room and sweep Eddie into his arms, ignoring his mild protests, and bring him out onto the floor with the rest of the couples, which now includes an ecstatic Dustin, twirling Rosa around.

Mike takes Eddie’s vacated spot next to Bill, leans back against the wall behind them. “Hey, so, I think you owe me a dance.”

“Do I?” Bill asks, raising his eyebrows. Despite this, he pushes himself off the wall and offers Mike his hand. “Why so?”

“I went to a line dancing bar for you,” Mike reminds him as they begin to sway slowly. The music has changed to a song with a faster tempo, but the two of them continue on to their own beat. “Call me cliché, but I want a real dance.”

Bill laughs. Overhead, the lights twinkle with the sound. “You know, I’ve been thinking,” he starts. “I actually have a friend back in New York who is looking for a roommate.”

“Yeah?” Mike tries and fails to hold back his grin. “What does this friend of yours do?”

“Nothing much,” Bill replies with a shrug. “He’s just this broke writer.”

“Tell your friend I happen to know a broke aspiring filmmaker.” The smile stretching across his mouth has reached truly ridiculous proportions. If it grows any wider, his teeth will probably start to fall out.

“I better warn you now, the place is tiny,” Bill says, as if anything he could ever throw at Mike would make him change his mind. “It’s only got one bed—”

“Which is,” Mike cuts in, giving Bill a meaningful stare, “not a problem at all.”

Bill exhales against Mike’s neck, the warmth of his sigh ghosting along Mike’s collarbones, making him shudder. It comes off like a promise. “I’m really glad I went with you on this road trip.”

“Trust me,” Mike says firmly, forcing Bill to glance up at him. “You really saved my life out there.”

Bill closes the gap between their lips, and even though this isn’t their first kiss, Mike’s breath still catches in his throat, his heart beating a little too fast. He surrenders it all to Bill, promises himself that he’ll continue to give this everything he has, for as long as Bill wants him to. He desperately hopes that Bill will never stop wanting him to.

Maybe he’s not the one who just got married, but he thinks he gets his happy ending all the same.

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A couple that works together, stays together: Michael Wheeler to direct movie adaptation of husband Bill Denbrough’s best-selling novel, *The Black Rapids*

By: DAILYMAL.COM REPORTER

PUBLISHED: 04:55 GMT, 19 December 2023 | **UPDATED:** 08:57 GMT, 19 December 2023

Fans rejoiced when it was announced late last year that horror writer Bill Denbrough’s beloved tale, *The Black Rapids*, would be making its debut on the big screen in early 2025.

However, in an interesting turn of events, Bill went on Twitter this morning to announce that his husband, director Mike Wheeler, had been chosen to direct the upcoming film, which will be the first horror flick under this young filmmaker's belt.

Many of the couple's fans took to social media to express their support for this decision, as did a few of their close celebrity friends, including supermodel, Jane Hopper-Marsh, Austin-based street artist, Will Byers, architect, Ben Hanscom, and hosts of the *Trashmouth Talks* series, Dustin Henderson and Richie Tozier.

"Wheelbrough," as fans affectionately dubbed the pair, married in the spring of 2021. They currently reside in New York City's East Village, but maintain residences in Paris and Los Angeles as well.

Here's hoping the stress won't come between this celebrity duo. Best of luck to both Mike and Bill!